

Q: Good afternoon, today is June 7th, 2017. My name is Athena and I'm here at Newton North with Zeyang Wang. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, what country are you originally from, why did you leave that country, how old were you, and who left with you?

A: I came from China, mainland China in '85. I think that I was 31. Why I leave the country...I guess for the time, China was just--had the so-called reform, Open Door Policy. And there's a really [00:01:15] who people open up their eyes to the world, and given the chance, a lot of people are eager to go out and see after 30-some years pretty much cut off from outside world. So I had got--applied, and got accepted by a couple of schools, so I came here for graduate school study.

Q: Did anyone come with you?

A: At time, no. Myself. And it's almost impossible you leave with anybody else, I mean, just, you're lucky get yourself a visa. And most likely if you go as a couple or something, and you get rejected because the possibility of immigration, it's hard. And if you ever seen people piled up in US Embassy, people, you know, these thousands of them, try to get in, get a visa, try to ask question, try to find the clue how to get out. So that time was quite an event.

__: I'm curious, Athena, your parents come together?

Q: No, they came separately, and they--I think they met in school.

__: Okay. I'm just curious, the change.

Q: Alright. So, what was it like for you when you first arrived in Newton, and do you remember your first day?

A: Oh, I went to Pittsburgh. First day...first day, well I went to New York first. And then my sister was there, working at Stamford, Connecticut. And so I took airplane at time called People Express, that was innovative, and you know--you get tickets when you get on and all that stuff. And so I took that, because it was cheap. I got in Pittsburgh, get off. One of my mother's classmates working Pittsburgh Medical Center and other professor in the lab, so she sent one of her students, pick me up and put me in an apartment. It was not eventful, I mean, you could get off...If you miss someone, you would be panicking because there's no phones, no--I had \$30 in my pocket, so...but, fortunately, somebody was there for me. And yeah, he had a car, and drove me to an apartment. At the time I think it was one level shared by three students. The rent was 85 bucks. And little bit leaking on top. [Laughter]

Q: Which school did you go to?

A: UPitt, the University of Pittsburgh.

Q: Have you faced difficulties because of your cultural inheritance, and if so can you give an example?

A: At the very beginning, and the difficulty of--mostly, in terms of language and culture, the things you eat, the things that you do, it's no--in school in China it's mostly arranged, very rigid. But here, it's--you pick your class, and do all things yourself. So it's...people--you see different things, and you see people hold you up and try to give you something to you, try to give you a secret and something. It's just...but most problems when I get off, in the start of school, was language and understanding and loneliness--I didn't know anybody--and those kinds of thing.

Actually, in terms of people, I think I didn't feel rejection or anything. I mean, I have an aunt, and she went through Cornell in '36, 1936, and got a PhD from Michigan State in...I think it's 1942 or somewhere around there. And she told me--and when she got married here and went to Chicago and her husband was one of those students that's called [00:07:20], it's one of those students, and get into like--studied physics in the design of airplanes and [00:07:31]. And they tried to find a place to stay, but they couldn't, because people wouldn't rent to them. And so they had to scramble and get south of Chicago. That's little bit, I mean, not run down or something, but it's not really--if you go to Chicago and you go south you can see it. It's like, a tough place to find a place to live.

But I don't--I haven't met anything like that. People are really warm and welcome, and feel welcome.

Q: Speaking of the language barrier, can you share a story about your first experience with learning English?

A: Oh. I mean, basically I just--we read some English in China, and my professor was an MIT graduate in physics, and so we read computer books, everything and--in English. But I just couldn't write. And the first time--I came in October--so the first time I ever went to a lab and the people say, "Oh, you cannot register in October, you have to come back in January." But I just didn't understand--I mean, generally, I kind of understand, but I just--I know this word, and I know this word. But it took me, like, mainly, when people totally turned off and start doing their own thing, and I understand "Oh, yeah, January." [Laughter]

And so it's just--I mean, when I go to class, a computer compiler class, the teacher was quite eventful--what's his name, David --and he was a veteran from Vietnam War, and he was tall, slim, and he was active. And at the time, he sit on the window--it was like, 14th floor or

something--and then he jumped down and he was talking--teaching the graphic, and he was very active, but I didn't understand the words.

Q: What were you studying at the time?

A: Computer science.

Q: So that would be rather difficult if you didn't understand.

A: Well, I studied computer science, so I don't--if he or she draws something on board, or I see it in a book, I can understand. But I don't understand, like, a couple times when the teacher said, "Class is cancelled!" And then I went anyway, so I sat there and other people again "Class is cancelled!" Oh.....cancelled! Oh! Cancelled. Okay. But it's like, you're basically--so, most of the study was by reading, and try to get the notes from other people. And that time was difficult because you feel like you have to rely on other people to feed you, to get going. And that was a whole year, I think, getting me started a little bit and understanding some things. But...yeah. I don't know, I mean, most people, even very, very bright people I know, even sent here by the government and get a very very high score in first semester in US in '80's pretty much struggled. The training, the language, now it's much better, and the student can have a good grasp of a language. But at the time I was just one--for so many years, no school, and no--I didn't go to an affluent elementary school. I mean, they said I went to a middle school, but there was no class. And I didn't go to high school and all that, so it's no--besides study by the video and like I was saying, there's no formal--I mean, I went to graduate school, so...But nobody was speaking English, I mean, we read. It was difficult, but somehow we all survived.

Q: What advice would you give to someone moving here from your country?

A: Well, it's hard to tell them too much, because they have a totally different perspective of their life and things here. The kids came here with money in the pocket and they even buy luxury stuff, and for us it's impossible at the time. And I remember whole summer I was doing some labor work in New York, I didn't even drink a can of Coke. It was just too much. Because you always compare things back there to here. Now there are--now China is better, people coming here have money, and they have better grasp of the language. And they have a different perspective. When I came here, there was no mall in China. There's no shopping mall, there's no escalator, there's no--it's a different place. It's like, maybe if you go to some remote area you can still see it, but it's different now. And so the country is different, the two countries, and the US is different now, I think.

So...what I can say to them if I have to is: just try to be open-minded, try to learn. Because even though China has get some 30 years progress after the reform and Open Door Policy, there are still quite a bit culturally and...like, in terms of the system, in terms of things you have to understand about a different world. That's a different world. Still. So how do you operate without essentially, totally control the government, and have all that to follow? How do you actually see free--use election, elect the government, and have involvement with the system, and do all kinds of things and have an independent mind and thinking, all that. I would like to see they still have that kind of desire to learn.

And some people come here not really learning. I mean, some young kids buy expensive cars. And one kid drive a Audi A8, and so fast, hit the ceiling in the tunnel, and died. I mean, 20 years old. You came to this country, drive an Audi A8. Audi A8 is probably 80, 90,000 dollars car. And drive so fast, not following the rules. So you're trying to show off or something? It's not a way of learning. And so there is a lot of things--even though the condition is better--and still lot of things to understand and not everyone--actually, most people in China are not driving an Audi A8. It's still a way to go. There's just a strange period of time, some people drive Audi A8 in China, even better, Ferrari, and--but most people still probably struggling. So how the society

and how all the people can get into the--sharing all the wealth and all the education, all that stuff, and still a long way to go. But it's a good thing, and people still come here and they're still trying to learn.

Q: And so how do you think about how you say like, the differences between the two countries--how is America similar or different to your expectations when you first came here?

A: Well, the two countries have different history and different perspectives and have a different system. And, I mean, there's no free election in China. It's not democratic, even though they try to claim it's already so. I think that it's a few thousand years, a couple thousand years, at least, of history in China, and people have their way of thinking and following the dynasty and whatever. So independent thinking and democratic system, that's still a new thing. I mean, especially from a historical point of view. And in US, start by that. I mean, start by people building from ground up and from few states to 13 to now how many, 51?

So in--there are so many things involved. So I think both systems have some merit, even highly centralized system have quite a bit efficiency--if not, China wouldn't have 30 years growth so fast. However, there are things--it's not only can be measured by the economic growth and that there's also other things. Because economic growth is totally controlled by a central force and will cause unbalancing in the society and other stuff. But on the other hand, US is facing the same trend and challenge. I mean, it's not like if you go totally free, economic society, we'll be rid of other problems. There's still unbalance - rich, poor, and education. And there's still all kinds of issues, cannot be really resolved because the democratic system had to be tackled. And so it takes a longer time to form a policy to get something done. So, there are things, and I guess...still everyone are learning.

Q: On the smaller level, putting aside the overall governmental structure, would you say that America was similar to China in how it operated in day-to-day life?

A: Oh. Well, yes and no. And--because--now it's a little bit more, because before, there was everybody working for the government. And no self-employment or that stuff. Now you do have that. Day-to-day life...I mean, everybody tries to make money, I guess, right? [Laughter] But in a slightly different way.

And yeah, I mean, in terms of--if I'm still in China, I'm retired, and probably quite a few years ago. And still in a lot of ways, relied on government for most stuff, and people here probably much more independent and financially independent and all that. But there is that factor, and the government do have now the--at least social security and Medicare--Medicaid--Medicare. And maybe healthcare still not, but social system is still there.

So, from my perspective, to live life here, you are a little bit more free in terms of information you can get, you can [00:25:13] you think, you don't have to follow strict instructions from somebody. That's different. But in terms of going out to eat and doing things, transportation and all that, I would say it's similar.

Q: Is there someone from your culture that you admire, and why?

A: I think...people, after so many years, have a very--people are very diligent, people are trying very hard in the culture in general. And that's not saying there's no people lazy. But in general if given the chance, people really take advantage of that, and work really hard. And I don't know, 20 years down the road, it'll be the same, but for last 30 years, they certainly did. And people really, really emphasize the family and value relationships and so, people mostly it's through that way to work together, even the financial business and all that--connections somehow. And it's good and bad, but it's close. And here it's a little bit loose, and even--good and bad, but it's different.

Q: Is there anyone specific that you think embodies that?

A: Anybody....most of us... [Laughter]

Q: Is there a question that we haven't asked you yet that you'd like to answer?

A: Oh, I wasn't prepared for that part...I guess...I have too short, too narrow experience, in terms of--to say anything about the immigration history. Most times before our generation, the people come here and go back. And so for me at least, I'm a citizen, an immigrant, but I'm also naturalized. It's different. It's just a short period of time, so how--for people--we are here, how to get a--really understand and study and getting how the system is different. But now that's new thing, and most people come here and go back, 90%, more. Because--there's only so many opportunities in this country. And I don't think President Trump really wants more people to be here. [Laughter]

But it's much harder now to find a job something. When I was--I found a job year end of '88 or beginning of '89, and at the time, was not too, too hard, because a lot of places were looking for people to do information science work and all that. But at the time, there are only so few Chinese students around, and so that's not really an issue, job-wise. And especially through '80's and 90's, the computer, dot com booming, there was plenty of work at that time, it was--any warm body is okay [Laughter]. But those things are always changing.

So, the people coming here--when I was just came here, I see a lot of Japanese and Korean, and people from Taiwan, and I don't see them anymore. I mean, a few, I mean, just at that time it was a lot. And maybe eventually China will go same way, develop to a certain level, and people will not try to go abroad. I don't know. I'm not answering your question, but just from that perspective I think everything--both countries are changing, everything is changing, and we are

going to see a lot of unknowns. But I guess...just open mind, be open-minded, just try to learn. And there's still plenty of opportunities for people to be successful in either place.

Q: It looks like our time is just about up. What is one more thing that you would like people 100 years from now to know about your time in the service? Your time--

__: Immigration.

Q: --your experience with immigration?

A: Oh. 100 years, that's a long time. My god. I want--that's an interesting period of time, and I think over the last 30 years, China get into the economic development and open the door, and the exchange of programs and learning. And at the time, from--start by technology, then you see a lot of people come here, do MBA, do social science and international relationships. So people are learning from all perspectives. And so I'm hoping all the exchanges will result to a better understanding and a better future for both countries. And for us, get on the airplane, no boat anymore, and get abroad and be a part of those exchange of culture and country and the system. It's part of the world. I mean, people are--have to know and understand and learn from each other, and to benefit from those kinds of knowledge and the merit and other advantages from each other to make a better future for people, for future generations. And so when they look back--a person is just a drop of water in the ocean, but at least we are in a bigger--a more informed world. And so we become part of that, and that's what we are, I guess.

Q: Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity

__: After formally finishing their interview, the participant shared another story, which will follow without introduction here.

__: So can you comment about the difference--it's not necessary going four generations up--but you and your brother, the differences in terms of assimilation, in terms of contribution to this country, or even maybe if you can comment a little bit about the difference of Newton and other cities you live, and your daughter's experience?

A: Okay, I mean--and you probably mentioned, right, already--my great-grandpa was the first 100 overseas student in 1873 into US--was the first batch of overseas students sent by the Qing Dynasty to study and was led by a student of Yale, Yung Wing. And so he stayed in Hartford, Connecticut, then Greenfield, Massachusetts for five years, then Phillips Academy for two years, and went to RPI [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute] for a year, then--because they are Westernized or have a tendency to be Westernized in the Qing Dynasty's view--officials' view--so they supposed to be in US for 15 years, but they were called back after eight, nine years, something like that. And so he went back to China to be a Captain in the Navy and...so at the very beginning start by lower grade, I mean, then raise up to like, Commander of the South Fleet, and so...that's a two-star General.

And for their generation it's different, right, I mean, they came here--first of all, I mean, Qing Dynasty, people have a queue. Okay, if you don't have a queue, your head is off. So that--so if you look at that picture, people have all that, and so that's Mandarin, it's not really Han, it's Mandarin. So you can see a student in high school or in school have a queue, and official dress is the Qing Dynasty dress, with the hat and have the dress like the old time, and it's laughable, for people to see that, that's comic...on campus.

But those students that are selected, young students--and my great-grandpa was 14, some were 11 or 12, something--and Yung Wing's idea was put them into families, to host families, they put

them, and day in, day out try to merge--immerse them into the culture. And all the families are arranged--old Christian families--that are arranged by the church. And so you can see first of all, they got paid, the living expenses, everything, got paid. And school, they paid for school, the government. They paid by the silver coin, the big one. And so they feel like, obliged to study hard and to study Chinese at the same time. They had get-togethers. They have to do those Chinese rituals, [00:39:48], all that stuff.

And so their perspective was different. I mean, it's difficult, too, much more difficult than I did. And they don't know English! I mean, there's no dictionary. So they haven't learned math and--maybe a little bit, I know it's not much by that time--and physics, chemistry. And they have to learn Latin at the time, they have to write in Latin, compose in Latin. I mean, 18--yeah, everybody had to learn. So he had to like--from 14 years, five, six years, seven years, took all that to graduate from Phillips Academy and then get in college. So it's--and go back, then was not official system. The official system was doing the [00:40:52], was doing--you have to write essays, and then--judged by the essays, and you get to, like--into the official system--organization. They are not--so, they went back to become all kinds of technicians. They went to Navy and most of them either railway and telegraph and mining and all that stuff. And most of them to the railway.

So for my generation it's a lot different now, because even though I didn't speak much English, but my parents did. And my mother went to Yenching in 1934. And she didn't--she got waived in English, she was good enough. And my father went to American school. So she was teaching English in France. And that's how he survived in World War II, because Germany took over France, and the government, money was cut off. Because Allies and--they're not in the same--the treaty, the country--they're not from the same group. But at the time, because of China isolation--and I have a lot of relatives outside--I mean, overseas. Because my family are from Guangdong, from south of country. So I get--first semester, I didn't have money. I borrowed money from relatives. And for most Chinese people, that's impossible. \$5,800 for a semester, in

Pittsburgh. At the time, my salary was probably \$30? 62 yuan. But my salary was--at my age, was high, because I have Masters Degree in China. And other people make less, 20-something.

So my perspective definitely far different from person who have a queue, back, all that stuff.

__: How is your daughter doing? What percentage is she American versus--

A: For her, that's different. She is here, graduated from school 5 years ago, she came here, and after half a year, she is okay with English. And after high school in Acton and went to University of Rochester and graduated and went to work a couple years working and went to Emerson College for a degree on speech pathologist. And she found a job in New York. And for her, it's not really much...That's the only country she knows. She doesn't have to--I mean, she struggled the first couple months, right, I mean, I didn't know how to--I remember she came back and asked me, "What is hop? And I say, "You say hot?" "Not hot, hop!" Hop...[Laughter] I didn't know what is hop.

So eventually we figured out, you know, that's kind of the same. She didn't know, and sometimes--she had a mitten wrapped somehow in the jacket. And she tried to find it, couldn't find it, and the teacher wanted to get her onto a bus, and she doesn't want to go, she wants to find it first. But she just [00:45:25] or something, and so teacher called me, and so I have to take some time off from work and find mittens in the jacket. So, she struggled, she didn't understand what's going on. But it's only a few months, after that...

But she's still--she's teaching in a school in New York with 70% Chinese students, I mean, immigrants. And most of them are from Fukien family, because they're doing the restaurant and all that stuff. And so she's teaching them, and her Chinese is good enough to read [00:46:23]. And so she's teaching the class with the people with language issues. But I don't think that she

had too much problem to communicate, to talk, to socialize with all colleagues and stuff and probably and--so for her, it's not--it's just life. Like you.

Q: Was she born in America as well?

A: No, she came here in five years.

__: I should stop, yeah. Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW